

POINT OF VIEW

The Clergy and the Laity

THE relationship between the clergy and the laity is one of the touchstones of the health of the Church. This relationship varies from age to age and from country to country. The subject is a delicate one, but without desiring to arouse controversy, it is worth looking at a few of the factors involved.

The first point to stress is the happy relationship which exists, by and large, between the clergy and laity in this country at the moment. Five main reasons may be given for this state of affairs. Perhaps the greatest single reason for this harmony is the poverty of the clergy in Britain coupled with their hard work. A priest in modern Britain has no chance of becoming a rich man; he must rather be prepared for a life which is neither particularly comfortable nor especially secure. There is today virtually no scope for what historians speak of as 'an ambitious prelate'. This means that an important sphere of disharmony is non-existent within the Church. The rewards of a bishop or an abbot are not, in the material sense, of such a nature that can provoke the envy of the lower clergy, nor are they such as to attract a self-seeking man into the Church for the sake of gain. Although this may be obvious, it is a thing of the utmost importance. One has only to remember the gulf which existed between many of the upper and the lower clergy during the latter part of the Middle Ages, or at the time of the French Revolution, to realize that times have changed for the better in this respect and to thank God for this. In the diocese in which I am fortunate to live, our bishop is certainly known by sight to those in every parish, known personally to many for he goes out of his way to approach all in the most friendly fashion, and though over seventy years of age travels round his large diocese continuously, confirming and preaching as well as opening new schools, bazaars and the like. He is a very real personal link between us and the Holy Father. He truly draws his flock round him, like the good shepherd he is.

A second cause of goodwill lies in the lack of vice in the

clergy. Scandals in the Church are rare. The clergy is well trained and conscientious. Every Catholic knows that his parish priest will, in case of necessity, come at any time of the day or night. Our priests have, in nearly every case, the confidence of their parishioners who look up to them as both spiritual and moral examples to be followed willingly and loyally. This respect extends outside the Church. However much a non-believer may attack the doctrines or the attitude of the Church on any particular issue, this attack is not directed at the state of the clergy themselves in this country, for the very good reason that any such attack would not bear even the most superficial scrutiny.

A third general reason for the good understanding prevailing is more difficult to define. It springs from and lies in that mutual confidence which has already been discussed. It manifests itself in the easy and natural way that so many of the clergy and laity show in their personal contacts. A member of the clergy in this country is not looked upon as a representative of a class cut off from the laity by a kind of unbridgeable gulf, a gulf which betrays itself in a servile type of politeness. The laity recognizes that the priest is a man set apart by his vocation and treats him with the deep honour which is his due as a man of God. This respect comes from both the head and the heart and is a manly thing. It is reinforced because so few priests try to take advantage of their position. The natural, friendly and cheerful bearing normally subsisting amongst the clergy and the laity rarely fails to impress the non-Catholic whose theories on this matter are often very far from the truth.

A fourth reason for this lack of friction arises out of the third reason. It springs from the readiness of the clergy to listen to the opinions of the laity in those matters where advice may legitimately be given. This relatively free exchange of ideas gives the laity that sense of responsibility within the Church which is so essential in preventing any growth of a spirit of anti-clericalism. Anti-clericalism within the Church is largely due, I believe, to a loss of human contact between clergy and laity; this feeling is one that can grow out of apparently trivial things but which once it has started takes a lot of stopping. At the risk of being smug, it would seem as if the Church in England has achieved a happy balance in this delicate realm where personalities can only too easily clash. The chief criticism in this sphere might well come

from the clergy and be directed at the layfolk for not being sufficiently forthcoming in their suggestions and for not shouldering enough of the organizational burdens proper to the layfolk.

A final reason for this harmony is the scrupulous way in which the vast majority of the clergy avoid identifying themselves with any political party. This political non-attachment results in far more weight being lent to any pronouncement by the clergy on social matters. If the clergy were regarded as being tied to a political party any statement of a politico-social nature would automatically be suspect. Further, however unjust this might be, there would be a tendency to consider that the clergy were making use of their spiritual powers to lend influence to their political views.

Some may argue that too cheerful a picture has been painted. Inevitably there must be exceptions to what has been said; some priests do not always achieve the high standards mentioned, nor—and much more frequently—do the laity live up to their Faith. Yet by and large I do believe this picture to be a true one. It is worth setting forth for two reasons. First, so often we tend only to look on the black side of the Church's life comparing the present age of general disbelief to that of the past; thus we forget the joyful aspects of today. Secondly, because there must be many priests who are lonely and who wonder if their work is appreciated; priests receive little praise—a serious sin of omission on the part of the laity.

In conclusion we should think more often about this side of the life of the spirit and pray more fervently that this harmony may continue; it is a very precious gift of God for which this country ought to be deeply thankful. The Mass has a magnificent prayer that sums up this petition. 'O Lord Jesus Christ, who didst say unto thine apostles, I leave you peace, my peace I give unto you; look not upon my sins but upon the faith of thy Church; and vouchsafe to grant her peace and union according to thy will.'

E. M. G. BELFIELD